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SPRECHEN SIE GOETHE, A SYNOPTIC ESSAY.

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENG.,CHAMPAIGN,ILL

PUB DATE NOV 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.52 11P.

DESCRIPTORS- *ENGLISH, *LANGUAGE, *LINGUISTICS, *LITERATURE, *SEMANTICS, CULTURAL CONTEXT, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, CULTURAL INTERRELATIONSHIPS, GRAMMAR, SYNTAX, VOCABULARY,

THE WAY IN WHICH WE CONCEIVE OF REALITY IS DEPENDENT UPON THE LANGUAGE SYSTEM WE USE. EACH LANGUAGE SYSTEM, WHETHER THAT OF A WHOLE CULTURE, A SUBCULTURE, OR AN INDIVIDUAL, EMBODIES IN ITS VOCABULARY AND SYNTAX AND RULES OF "GRAMMAR" A SET OF ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF REALITY AND THE CORRECT WAYS TO MAKE SENSE OF THINGS. THUS, UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN "PRIMITIVE" PEOPLE AND OURSELVES, ANCIENTS AND MODERNS, THE EAST AND THE WEST IS DIFFICULT. THE DIFFICULTY HAS BEEN HEIGHTENED IN RECENT TIMES BECAUSE OUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF REALITY HAVE SHIFTED, BUT OUR LANGUAGE HAS NOT BEEN BASICALLY ALTERED IN FORM AND CONTENT. ENGLISH, FOR EXAMPLE, PRESUMES A STATIC, MATERIAL WORLD COMPOSED OF SEPARABLE OBJECTS, SO THAT NOUNS ARE PREEMINENT IN EVERY SENTENCE AND OUR SYNTAX AND GRAMMAR DEMAND A SIMPLISTIC LINEAR LOGIC. IF WE ARE TO RESPOND ADEQUATELY TO LITERATURE, WE MUST BE ABLE TO "THINK" IN THE LANGUAGES OF THE AUTHORS OF THE PAST AND OF OTHER CULTURES, AND WORK OPEN-MINDEDLY TO GRASP THE EXPERIMENTS IN SYNTAX AND GRAMMAR OF MODERN WRITERS IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO ALTER THE LANGUAGE TO FIT NEW AND DIFFERENT CONCEPTIONS OF REALITY. (THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (DL)

ED017521

Draft

C.12

Program C.12
Vocabulary of Literature: Ancient and Modern, East and West
(Specimen: The Language of Drama)

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SPRECHEN SIE GOETHE?

(a synoptic essay)

Basil Busacca

Urging the value of mastering Chinese, a Swedish linguist (Bernhard Karlgren in The Chinese Language) says that it is the way to an understanding of the Chinese soul. Arguments against translation commonly cite "the unique spirit," "the way of thought," "the manner of looking at things" which it is possible to express only in the original language. We pass a major barrier in studying language when we "can think in it." It is a commonplace that our personal, as well as national, languages reveal us; and, in highly verbal societies, we size each other up largely through attention to the language we use. Although it is evident that a way of saying involves a way of seeing, we usually consider this matter of the relation between language and identity as resident in surface content, that is, in the meaning or message as it translates into our own patterns of speech. If we hear someone say, "Ah ain' goan learn nohow," we understand this as equivalent to, "In any case, I shall not learn." But we also recognize something else, that the speaker does not use so-called standard English, that he appears to be, in this sense, limited by "ignorance."

If we are all, in the familiar phrase, the captives of our ignorance, the benchmarks of that are visible in what we say and write. Bruno Snell (The Discovery of the Mind) and others have made the point that man's concepts do not far outreach his language. Homer, for example, Prof. Snell argues, could not think certain thoughts, conceive matters in certain ways, at a time when there was no language in which to discover or fix them. More parochially, we are all daily reminded of the prison of ignorance when, for example, we can make no sense of the financial pages of the papers, or of the "new math." It is less often remarked that we are at least

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equally the prisoners of our knowledge, or that a preemptive knowledge can work to insure an area of "ignorance." Even with all our Western pluralism, the most pluralistic of us uses his mind, and even his senses, in ways to which he has been trained, within assumptions he has not been trained to recognize, and is virtually blind to any other order of perception or understanding.

Within a culture, or sub-culture, we become accustomed to regard as natural (as simply and transparently real and true) what is in fact culturally determined. Operation Headstart workers report that pre-school Mexican-American children are almost non-verbal in both English and Spanish but acutely aware of a language of intonation and gesture that was previously all but unknown to the teachers, and in which they are inferior in understanding. Edward T. Hall's The Silent Language is a popular survey of languages and meanings unknown to the verbal American. Levi-Strauss has amassed abundant evidence of the intellectual and scientific sophistication of peoples we call primitive because our knowledge, and the arrogance of our knowledge, prevents us from comprehending not only their achievements but the existence and value of orders of meaning and significance different from our own. Even our linear notion of time is a cultural artifact, neither universal nor necessary to the conduct of human business: some American Indians operate with quite different conceptions of time. What we regard to be our commonsense view of the world, our way of seeing things as they are, is neither truer to the world, nor more natural, than any other. What we see is not "the way things are," but what we have been taught to notice, in the way we have been taught to notice and understand.

Only occasionally and glancingly do we recognize that a language-system, whether that of a whole culture, a sub-culture, or of an individual, embodies a set of assumptions about the nature of reality, about the correct ways to make sense of things, and thus about standard patterns of meaning. Karl Vossler, in The Spirit of Language, sometimes argues from this recognition, for example, but

never confronts its implications. What is involved is something more likely to be obscured than revealed by phonemic and morphemic and other valuable studies in etymology and philology, namely that every language constitutes a perspective on the nature of things, a sort of "native" commonsense viewpoint. In verbal languages, vocabulary and syntax and rules of "grammar" incorporate a model of reality (a functional ontology, a practicing metaphysics, a set of paradigms). This fact makes genuine understanding difficult not only between "primitives" and ourselves but between ancients and moderns, and between East and West. I once heard the Chinese philosopher Dr. Fung Yu-Lan say in a lecture, "To put the matter into Western terms, what is tangential for you is central for us, and vice-versa." At the same time he implied, quite rightly, that Western terms didn't express it very well. The same fact creates tremendous, and rarely recognized problems when a culture, or sub-culture or individual, shifts assumptions about the nature of reality, and about how to make sense of it, without basically altering the form and content of language.

In the West, since the 18th century, we have been pouring new wine into old linguistic bottles so fast that there is now a thoroughgoing contradiction between the forms of English, for example, and most of the current images of reality on which we find it necessary to operate. The old linguistic bottles have cracked, but we patch them up and keep going, wondering meanwhile why it gets harder and harder to say exactly what we mean. In truth, we have a schizoid situation in Western languages, and we manage at all, linguistically, only through an elaborate but imperfect system of double-think. We say to a student, "What's the matter? Don't you want to make anything of your life?" But we do not mean matter or make or thing, or even life in the discrete static material finitude our syntax forces on the sentence. The whole speech works with a language appropriate only to carpentry. We reify abstractions, because our language requires us to use nouns on the model of things. More important, we conceive of relational processes (mind, memory,

thought, moral integrity, etc.) as though they were things. What are the properties of memory? There are none. Memory is not a thing. It is a false-noun, the reification of the complex of relational processes we call remembering.

Our linguistic bias is upside down. Instead of the insane practice of treating everything as a thing, we would do better to start with the notion that nothing is ever simply a thing. The apparently static and unitary character of "objects" is not a fact but a function of short-term observation. The sheet of paper I hold did not exist as a sheet of paper a short time ago, and in a relatively short time will no longer exist. If we photograph an avalanche at fast enough speed, it "stops." If we lived at a much faster pace than the avalanche, it would be as static as a telephone pole, but then we would not say "it" but would regard each component of the "avalanche" separately. Comparably, we are generally unaware of large processes moving in the tempo of geological time. The norms of our language remain monistic and simplistic, but we are thoroughly, if confusedly, pluralistic. Biology long since de-Newtonized "life"(under the aspect of biology) with the concept of metabolic process, but it could not solve <u>in</u> language the problem of language, and, like other sciences, turned to the non-verbal patterns of mathematics, symbolic logic, diagrams, and three-dimensional models. The norms of English are utterly at odds with most of the conceptual worlds in which we must make sense. English presumes a static, material world, composed of separable objects. Nouns are preeminent in every sentence. Verbs are merely what the noun does, or is done to it, or the state or condition of the noun. Other "parts of speech," like verbs, are syntactical second class citizens. What is most important is to have names for things. Syntax and grammar not only insure the primacy of the noun, but demand a simplistic linear logic. The irony is that the key terms of our time are, as our irrelevant grammar would put it, de facto <u>verbals</u>; process, method, estimate, development, interruption, correlation, coordination, verification, validation, co-

efficient, standard deviation, and so on.

The English linguistic bias toward a discredited model of reality is instantly apparent in our terminology for poetry. All of our terms simply define the degree of discrepancy from an 18th century mechanistic model of reality. We say image, run-on line, pathetic fallacy, pyrrhic, metaphor, all of which are implicitly pejorative, and we define the validities of poetry as distortions of prose, and say meter, rhyme, alliteration, oxymoron. The vocabulary of prosody intrinsically treats poetry as something done to prose. Even Coleridge, narcotized more by the language he inherited and by then-current philosophy than by drugs, settled for terms like esemplastic and imagination which grant without struggle the crucial point at issue. Both terms accept the view that some norm other than those of poetry is properly real, and that poetry is an adjectival undertaking. Yet poetry is not the embroidery of prose, nor the destruction; it is a different language, or constellation of languages, with orders of authenticity unknown to prose, and the subversive vocabulary of our prosody not withstanding, it is not contingent upon prose.

If there is, nonetheless, an irreducible residue of prose grammar in poetry, there is more than a residue of 18th century linguistic bias for prose-writers as well as poets to contend with. One result is that, "within" a dictionary language, individuals and groups develop distinctive language-systems. Besides the obvious examples of specialized terminology (margin means something different in finance and in printing) there is the basic fact that, as we say, one turns language to one's own uses. More accurately, one's language embodies the reality one knows (still more accurately, each of one's languages--in the sense that one talks sociology or talks religion--embodies one of the realities one knows). One's specific grammar, syntax, punctuation, terminology indicate, within the limits of the dictionary language, what one "knows" to be the "true" nature of things (the specific linguistic medium is truly the message). Reality is known differently not only from dictionary language to dictionary language but from culture to culture, period to

period, group to group, individual to individual. Buddha knows that the phenomenal world is mere maya, Dante knows it to be ephemeral, Dewey knows it is that upon which all meaning must be predicated. Consider: God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform--Whatever is, is right--The efficient and the final cause--Where ingnorant armies clash by night-- Age is wisdom--Don't trust anybody over 30--Albion is perfidious--People are no damn good--Baby, they won't even let you get started--It's written in the stars--Existence precedes essence. That we "understand" each of these statements means that we instantly invoke for each the unique model of reality within which it is meaningful. We may bracket the "reality" in question, regard it as not only contingent but mad, but in practice we recognize that only within that reality is the statement meaningful on its own terms (it may be meaningful separably on other terms; a "statement in astrology" might mean "unemployable" to an astronomy department chairman interviewing the speaker for a faculty position). More important, the development of specialized language systems is the only means by which any model of reality except that which governs the dictionary language can be suggested at all. Idealism, functionalism, existentialism, like nuclear physics, and the cosmology of Einstein, are carried by language only by overlaying the 18th century grammar with a "bridge grammar" to the specialized discourse. The difficulties in reading Einstein, Sartre, Whitehead are largely in the contradiction between the basic dictionary grammar (with its Newtonian rigidity) and the functional terms of what is being discussed.

It is conventional enough to recognize that to understand a statement in a given author, one must know the author's work well enough to comprehend what the statement means in the context of the work. What is involved in "knowing the work," however, is not always simply deducible with standard tools of analysis. I remember a student asking me whether Walter Pater was a foreign (that is, non-English) writer. "He's English, and a stylist!" I said, rather too quickly; for basically the student was right. He had been reading an essay called "The Child in the House" and there

Pater invents a syntax to counter the linear norms of English and permit time to stand still while the prose explores the various presences imminent in the moment. In this work Pater is closer to Proust, doing something parallel to French in The Remembrance of Things Past, than either is to more passive writers in their own traditions. Faulkner also had to make a new syntax in order to carry his complex time-concurrances, and so, of course, did Joyce in Finnegans Wake.

Contrast 17th century France, in which the courtly language, with its use of On instead of Je, for example, corresponds (as everyone knows) to the coeval linking of the ideal of the non-eccentric man (the man in perfect adjustment to the impersonal etiquette of his role) to the notion of hierarchy and order and to intrinsic norms in cosmology, philosophy, politics, and social organization. Moliere satirizes "eccentricity" as discrepancy from a rigid social norm, and the first mark of the eccentric is linguistic individuality (often "extravagance" or "crudity"). Racine's characters, when they are not tragically passionate, speak even of themselves with detachment, "as if in third person" as the well-known phrase has it. The Fables of LaFontaine are marked by restrained, impersonal elegance, as though the writer were not a living individual but the disembodied voice of the absolutes of the period, a time committed to the certainty that an objective, publicly-definable, correct way exists for man and in nature. The norms of the language embody this certainty: precision, logical order, and a grace measurable by rule. It is not coincidence that the French Academy was established in the very heart of this period.

William Butler Yeats quite consciously drew upon the example of Nō drama when he was creating the forms of the new Irish theater. The Nō is allusive, evocative, poetic, focussed on emotional states, given to linking what we would call the supernatural and mundane, is simple at the first level, complex in implication. The action is hieratic, the language stylized, as if it were the speech of a disembodied intelligence, not inhuman but not finitely human, the language of an absolute nature speaking in its own right, the whole fixed in ritual iterations of archetypal patterns of action, feeling, attitude, response.

The "unearthly" quality of Yeats' plays derives largely from a perspective which takes as base-line a continuum of (perhaps legendary) Irish ways of realizing the world. The local and accidental and particular are insubstantial in Yeats. The Real is the substratum, like an underground river (which Yeats brings to the surface), of the "authentic" Ireland which is less a matter of geography or history or biography than of spirit and tonality.

In Yeats as in Nō, the character who speaks seems less to speak for, or as, himself than to constitute some limitation by accent or emphasis upon the voice of a corporate ethnic entity. Discourse is impersonal, a little detached, revalatory within orders of muted elegance. Knaves and brigands, scarcely less than kings or scholars, use a hieratic and formal syntax. I mean much more than the fact that characters rarely use the vulgar language. I mean they speak with the voice of a legendary culture, they speak as members of a mythical society, never coincident with any actual date or locus of cultural history, but as (or as if) of something subliminal to every time and place. Potential in the mundane, the language suggests, there is a reality which is magical, supernal and infernal, which is immanent in all actual discourse of a people. This, it seems evident, is a major component of what we recognize when we say that the world of Yeats is uniquely Irish, or that Nō is distinctively Japanese.

As represented by most contemporary Irish playwrights, the patterns of Irish speech generally challenge the Cartesian logic of the standard English sentence. The magical use of language, language as incantation (the power of Saying, the Blarney Stone, the gift a' gab) join with a non-English view of things in which inanimate objects and abstractions are treated as beings (we, from our Cartesian dualism, and meterialism, call this personification, animism) and a judgmental dimension (doubt, or assurance): "Surely it's a tiger of doubt has leapt upon her, twisted the brain in her skull, her tongue rattling a tambourine theology."

There is a general absence of the English dichotomies between human and non-human, animate and inanimate, natural and supernatural, magical and mundane; that is, although these are separable, they are immediate on the same terms, the same plane of reality. The Irish model of the real, as represented in Synge and Lady Gregory, and even O'Casey, is not that which forms the basic paradigms of Anglo-American language, and the syntax and grammar and rhythms, as well as the vocabulary, are correspondingly different.

Dr. Johnson was not eccentric in his time when he sneered at the fool who would examine the individual (i.e., eccentric) leaf, and Laplace's "calculator" assumed the propriety of a model of the world composed mainly of unitized nouns. Predictably, Dr. Johnson was not charmed by double-grammar in Shakespeare and Donne. Pope, whose verse is not marked by negative capability, found a classic to be Nature still but Nature methodized; and the Age had Aristotle still but Aristotle mechanized. Necessarily, Blake "violated" orthodox grammar. So did the romantics, and Hopkins.

At least at a distance of 2,000 years, Latin seems more comfortable in Caesar and Tacitus and Martial than in translations and imitations of Greek lyric or drama. Even Lucretius and Ovid strain against the proper limits of what appear to be the bureaucratic paradigms of "Imperial" Latin. The language, as little as the society, permits the comic poets to work in the open world of Aristophanes, and Roman comedy copies the works of a despoiled Greece, the age of Menander. Seneca has no choice but to reduce Greek tragedy to the closed world of stoic morality; his philosophy and his language block him off from making the ultimate challenge to the nature of things that is characteristic of Greek drama, and of 5th century thought; Seneca's plays are not tragedies, but parables of horror, neatly segregated from Roman gravitas by vulgar moralisms.

In the "Bhagavad-Gita," which is not drama but might be, a major issue is to reconcile temporal responsibilities with eternal (or better, since I've Westernized

the way I put that, the responsibilities within one incarnation and those which are trans-carnational). In Sanscrit, which requires hundreds of forms of each word to satisfy the demand for local precision, and fixes a very rigid grammar over expression, the absolutes are unchallengeable, as in Indian thought, and the issues are matters of local ajudication. On its own terms, the problem of the "Bhagavad-Gita" is not meaningful in the West, where popular thought assumes that responsibility within time is consistent with ultimate responsibility, while orthodox Judeo-Christian theology, after Job, assumes that the answer is ultimately knowable only to God, and both conceive the problem in the simplistic terms of the linguistic paradigm. But issues in Sanscrit literature are more apparent than real. Shakuntala and The Clay Cart,to take the best-known dramas, explain the order in seeming disorder. Ideationally , they explicate rather than question.

Oriental drama is not conceived in terms of tragedy and comedy, although Indian and Chinese and Japanese drama are full of scenes a Westerner would so-identify. But Western thought, even at its most Christian, never fully disposes of the problem of evil which was so powerfully explored by Greek drama. In the East generally, so far as I have been able to discover, the nature of things is a morally closed order to which the Western definition of the problem of evil is meaningless. Appropriately, therefore, Chinese drama, for example, is classified in terms of what we would call plot, or character, or situation, but is more properly to be identified with recurring patterns, behavioral paradigms, much more like myth or fable in the West than like the implicit assertions of order and disorder in the universe which underlie the security and insecurity of man presented in comedy and tragedy. Appropriately, Chinese does not have the segregated parts of speech of Western languages, nor a real pattern of tenses. In the language, as in the drama, the pattern of "what is" may belong equally to past, present, and future.

Literature, it is often said, presents what is, or what might be, or what ought to be. Each of these is valid, if at all, by reference to the model of the real em-

bodied in the basic language of a culture, or its adaptation by a sub-culture or by an individual. If we have to think in Chinese, to give full faith and credit to Chinese drama, we have no less to think in Shakespeare to apprehend King Lear.